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Wind River Reservation, Wyoming

Entrepreneurship, they say, will encourage more people to shop locally, while attracting more outside dollars into the community

The people of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming view entrepreneurship as the key to future survival. Entrepreneurship, they say, will encourage more people to shop locally, while attracting more outside dollars into the community. Locally owned businesses are important for a community that faces such challenges as a 54% unemployment rate, 28% living on per-capita payments to tribal members, and 62% living below the poverty level. While there are many opportunities for economic

development, the twist is finding the right strategy and maintaining traditional cultural and tribal values that are important to the two tribes that share this reservation.

For many entrepreneurs, the main obstacle is financing. The Wind River Development Fund (WRDF) provides micro-loans after completion of the Strengthening and Growing Entrepreneurs (SAGE) course offered by the Wind River Development Fund. But as one local entrepreneur says, “People are scared they are going to get their credit rejected—a lot of people have good ideas but don’t want to take the risks because they are afraid to quit their current job, with nothing to fall back on. Taking risks is scary.”

Wind River is similar to many rural communities in the U.S. facing survival challenges. With the expansion and sprawl of large retail chains, it is difficult for smaller entrepreneurs or even established businesses to survive. There is competition between Lander and Riverton, just 20 miles apart, for consumer dollars. One of the Shoshone tribal members drives that point home. “We need to make businesses profitable and successful by teaching the community to shop locally first, but Wal-Mart is so close.” She also says that while the superstores may have cheaper shelf prices, “by the time you pay for gasoline to get there and back the full cost is probably higher.”

Another businessman, who operates a trading post on the reservation, echoes a similar sentiment. “I can’t charge high prices for the items in my store because I can’t compete with Denver and Cheyenne.”

Once traditional enemies who were forced together in 1868, the tribes today govern reservation lands jointly while maintaining separate identities, languages and cultures.

The beautiful Wind River Reservation is located on 2.2 million acres in west central Wyoming, spanning from Riverton to the east and ending near the town of Dubois to the west. The north-south range encompasses the Owl Creek Mountains to the north to Sand Draw to the south. The reservation is home to two tribes that are linguistically and culturally different. The Northern Arapahoe and the Eastern Shoshone cooperate on reservation-wide matters to meet the needs of all citizens. Once traditional enemies who were

forced together in 1868, the tribes today govern reservation lands jointly while maintaining separate identities, languages and cultures.

Ft. Washakie, 40 miles west of Riverton, serves as the tribal headquarters for both the Shoshone and Arapahoe. Other communities within the immediate area include Ethete, Wind River, St. Stephens and Arapahoe. A joint business council meets periodically to make reservation-wide decisions, while each tribe has a separate tribal council to handle matters that are specific to that tribe.

The joint business council is responsible for oversight activities on matters that concern jointly owned resources, programs and land, of which each tribe owns 50%. The leadership position of the joint business council alternates between an Arapahoe chair and a Shoshone chair every other meeting or as agreed upon between the two tribes.

There are many layers and levels of bureaucracy involved when each individual tribe, as well as the joint council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), work together. One result of the complex procedure is anyone trying to do economic development tends to find their task overwhelming. “This is one of the main weaknesses of the system because almost anyone can present an opportunity at any time or anyone representing an outside entity can propose (a project) for consideration to either tribe, the joint council, or the BIA,” said one tribal planner. “Thus, we spend a lot of time and resources with a lot of different entities working separately toward the same goal which creates competitive chaos, and the result is usually that nothing gets accomplished.”

The “old style” of business features outside entities that go to the BIA, tribal attorneys or tribal members looking for who they thought were “movers and shakers” to sponsor their proposals. They often wine and dine the locals, expecting them to help bypass the rules, regulations and red tape. This has created a need for an initial single point of contact to reduce the opportunity for deals to take place that are detrimental to the tribes and their resources.

Economic pursuits that are culturally, ceremonially and tribally sensitive that generate revenue define economic development.

Sovereignty, jurisdiction and ownership are critical to tribal economic development. The tribal leaders would like to see the tribe grow economically but carefully. Economic pursuits that are culturally, ceremonially and tribally sensitive that generate revenue define economic development. The tribal planners have seen business opportunities come and go and remember that one of the most successful economic development projects came as a result of a forest fire.

The Kates Basin fire scorched over 136,000 acres and was ranked as one of the top ten forest fires at the time. But with destruction came opportunity. The tribes contracted to administer the \$2.3 million rehabilitation plan, which was an important step in their efforts to become more independent of the federal government.

Another successful endeavor was the negotiation of the Western Area Power Administration electrical allocation contract. Both of these projects capitalized on natural resources, which, when linked with tourism, can increase sources of revenue.

Another source of revenue is entrepreneurship. An enterprising entrepreneur who opened a kids' clothing store in Arapahoe credits part of her success to the Wind River Development Fund and their efforts. The Wind River Development Fund engages interested tribal members in the SAGE program, a 10-week course specifically designed for reservation entrepreneurs. The Wind River Development Fund is a partner in the Oweesta Collaborative which was established as a

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demonstration project focusing on native entrepreneurship in South Dakota and Wyoming. The collaborative incorporates a network of volunteer and paid professional service providers, coaches and mentors to answer questions and provide one-on-one help to start or grow a business. The premise of the demonstration project is that by systematically growing the private sector on Indian reservations, conditions of long-term poverty can be reduced. According to an Oweesta Collaborative coordinator, “the program is based on the

Lakota value of Wawokiye: generosity without expectation of return.” She says that the initiative is a “systematic approach to business development centered on the specific needs of native entrepreneurs.”

Once students have finished the 50-hour course in such areas as rural marketing, cash flow projections, setting business goals and dealing with tax issues, they are eligible to apply for a small loan from the Wind River Development Fund. A written business plan is also completed, and that has proved to be a valuable asset to Native entrepreneurs who can use their plans as leverage for additional funding. Another valuable program of the WRDF is the Individual Development Account (IDA) that provides, according to the Shoshone Times, “a 3:1 match designed for working families to achieve lasting economic independence by regular saving to ultimately purchase an asset--a small business or a home.”

The SAGE class is also helping a tribal member start a retail sportswear store. “It’s going to be something similar to a Footlocker,” she said. She notes that reservation residents are driving as far as Casper or Denver to buy shoes and athletic apparel. “I am hoping I can get it going. I am going to gear more towards the sports, regular sports, basketball, baseball, football and the (sports) clothing.”

As on many reservations, the Arapahoe tribe exercised its sovereignty by establishing a small casino just south of Riverton at the 789 Truck Stop complex as an additional source of revenue. Now in its 14th year, the casino is the only one in the region. It will soon be replaced by a much larger casino that will offer Class III gaming which permits Vegas style gambling. With casino revenue and increased tourism, a few small businesses have cropped up. The Shoshone tribe is also working toward building a tribal casino in another area of the reservation.

But gambling, a lifeline for many tribes, has limited potential here. In Hot Springs and Fremont Counties, cows outnumber people by three to one. The population in the two counties surrounding the reservation is 40,000, including 7,200 Northern Arapahoe and about 4,000 Eastern Shoshone. The key is combining the tourism potential with gaming.

Besides the casino and truck stop, other businesses include an R.V. park, an art gallery, two trading posts, auto repair business, utility company, grocers, gas stations, laundromat and

printing business, to name a few, scattered throughout Ft. Washakie, Ethete and Arapahoe. The largest economies in the region rely on resources such as agriculture, ranching, and mining.

Educating people about keeping dollars in the community, shopping locally and breaking a cycle of dependency is critical if this community wants to succeed while maintaining cultural traditions.